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WHY BRITISH WORKMEN CONDEMN THE WAR.

BY F. MADDISON, M. P.

DURING the last few months, and especially in the course of the recent debate in the House of Commons, much has been said about the feeling of the British people with regard to the war now raging in South Africa. With the exception of Ireland, where open sympathy with the Boers has been expressed, and endorsed by the overwhelming majority of the Irish nation, it has been claimed by Ministers, and to some extent by the Opposition also, that the Empire is absolutely united in the determination to crush the two Dutch Republics. The supremacy of the Briton over the Boer is now presented as the one sole issue, and this policy, it is declared, unites every section and merges all parties into one patriotic whole. Newspapers support this view in leading articles written to suit the occasion, while column after column of descriptive accounts of "the call to arms" of the volunteers leaves the impression that in mansion and cottage alike the war is the one absorbing topic, and to go to the front the ruling passion. This is the picture painted by the Government and their allies in the press and elsewhere. Does it faithfully represent the facts—is it true to life? The purpose of this article is to examine its accuracy so far as the work-people of the United Kingdom are concerned, and to see what is their attitude to the war and the ultimate settlement which will follow.

First, then, how has the terrible struggle in South Africa affected the masses of the people? This question may perhaps best be answered by saying that they have as yet barely realized the actual situation. When war was proclaimed it caused none of those sensations which the yellow press tried to work up, and even to-day there is an absence of anything approaching excitement. That natural calmness which has won the admiration of hostile Continental critics is displayed to the full by the work-people of

the country, but candor compels me to say that it is due to some considerable extent to their slackness in following public events, never more marked than during this last five years. But, of course, the serious reverses to our arms have had the effect of quickening the interest in the war, and just in proportion as this awakening has developed, all traces of jingoism, which feeds on ignorance, have passed away. But, as a matter of fact, among what may be called the regular body of workers there has never existed anything which could fairly be termed enthusiasm, much less any mad frenzy for predominance and conquest. The Government apologists are on safe ground when they appeal to the workman's pride of race by eulogizing the dauntless bravery of his brothers who are fighting and dying for a cause he does not understand, but associates with his country. He will listen to nothing which seeks to weaken the military arm in its effort to strike a successful blow against an enemy in possession of British territory. However wrong Mr. Chamberlain's diplomacy may have been, and even if you convince him that President Krüger's ultimatum only forestalled our own by a few days, you will not shift the average British workman from his position—that so long as an inch of Natal or Cape Colony is held by the Boers there cannot and should not be peace. That this is the attitude of the working classes as a whole seems to me to be indisputable.

But even this resolute determination has not made the people jingoes, nor does it justify the assertion that the Government's policy finds universal endorsement. So far, even in free England, it has not been an easy matter to secure the opportunity to publicly examine the causes which led to the war. Under the plea of patriotism, the whole Tory and most of the Liberal press have held up criticism of the Government's diplomacy as only one remove from treason. To speak while negotiations were proceeding was characterized as playing into the hands of the Boers and embarrassing the Colonial Secretary, and to say that the war might have been avoided after it had begun is to be immediately dubbed a pro-Boer, while a reference to any other settlement than one of annexation pure and simple stamps you at once as an avowed enemy of your country. This is the kind of political atmosphere which has been created by the war party, and it is not one calculated to stimulate thought and inquiry. Under such circumstances, it is not to be wondered at that large numbers of

workmen have mistaken the dictum of a Minister for truth, and thought that patriotism demanded of them the surrender of judgment and conscience at the bidding of some statesman who had outraged both. It may be frankly admitted that the constant beating of the war-drum has for the moment caught the ear of the crowd, and at election times they are most useful. But the crowd does not ultimately govern. Experience shows that what is called working-class opinion in England is not obtained by a counting of heads, but by collective expressions from organized bodies. Thus we are said, and rightly, to be the stronghold of trade unionism, and yet only about one in every five of the male population is a member of a trade union. But that minority, even when less powerful, has inspired and given shape to industrial legislation. Nor has it done this contrary to the general desire of the majority. Outside the sphere of organized labor, but in close touch with it, is a large number of workmen, the agricultural laborers forming the chief group. For my immediate purpose these may be included in one section. Both have sufficient cohesion on the one hand and distinctive individuality on the other to be able to form a volume of public opinion capable of being analyzed and labelled. But these do not exhaust the divisions of the working classes. There is the unattached—not merely those who do not form part of any definite organization, but who lack any of those distinguishing features necessary to give them a distinctive place in public opinion. These do not argue about right or wrong. They simply accept the dogma that whoever is against the Government cannot be for his country. But this can no more be regarded as working-class opinion than that of any other section. To obtain what is likely to be the enduring verdict of British workmen, we must go to the accredited mediums by which it is invariably conveyed.

One of the most important of these organs of industrial opinion is the Trade Union Congress. This body fights shy of anything of the nature of party politics, and, as the war comes within that category to some extent, there was hesitation to allow it to be introduced. In the end, a resolution was carried protesting against asserting the British demands by force. Much of the value of this pronouncement was lost on account of the debate taking place when so few delegates were present. This was not the fault of Mr. W. C. Steadman, M. P., who moved the motion, and there is little doubt that a still better

result would have been obtained if the discussion had taken place earlier. Then the London Trades Council, the mouthpiece of the organized workers, skilled and unskilled, of the metropolis, where jingoism always begins first and ends last, has ranged itself on the side of peace. But in many respects there is no better test of organized working-class opinion on a political question like the war than the attitude of the labor members of the House of Commons. They are all trade unionists, but have no definite organization in Parliament. Each pursues his own course, and therefore they cannot be accused of acting together like machine politicians. Further, they represent various schools of thought. There is Mr. Thomas Burt, a Radical, who declines to adopt the special badge of labor, while Mr. John Burns calls himself a Socialist, and does not act officially with the Liberal party. Mr. B. Pickard is the uncompromising advocate of State-regulated hours of labor in mines, which Mr. John Wilson as resolutely opposes. Side by side are Mr. C. Fenwick and Mr. S. Woods, the latter having beaten the former for the post of Secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trade Union Congress. Without any party ties or any arranged action, every workman member of the House of Commons, with one solitary exception, condemns the policy which led to the war, and has marked this disapproval by his vote. This solidarity is significant, and to many of us is the sure indication of the ultimate verdict of the democracy.

It may be worth while examining the ground of this opposition to the war policy, which is common to the entire body of working-class opponents. To begin with, they are not pro-Boers. These Dutch farmers are regarded as reactionaries—Tories, in fact, of the old school—and it is felt that it was inevitable that the new conditions resulting from the mining industry should cause trouble. Therefore, the Uitlanders' grievances have not been denied, but the British workman fails to see why the doctrine of patience, so persistently preached to him during this century, while he has been agitating for reforms, many of which are still denied him, should not be applied to the gold seekers of the Transvaal, especially as they were foreigners in an independent State. Take the question of the franchise which was selected by Sir Alfred Milner, with the approval of Mr. Chamberlain, as the test reform. These Uitlanders, many of whom were not British, have only endured their disabilities for some ten years. This seems to work-

men in England a very short period in the history of reform. Why, they remember that it was not until 1832 that any attempt was made to enfranchise the people, and that what is called the great Reform Bill left untouched entirely the masses of the population. It was this bitter disappointment that gave strength to, if it did not originate, the Chartist movement. The work-people had not to wait ten years only for the next step in the widening of the franchise, but thirty-five years, the interval being filled in with much suffering and persecution of the men who led the agitation for popular representation. And then, when the artisans of the towns did obtain the vote, it was so hampered with conditions as to make it largely inoperative. But the bill then passed left some two millions of Uitlanders in the country districts, who were for all practical purposes as much outside the commonwealth as though they had been aliens. Again a weary period of waiting followed, and it was some seventeen years before the agricultural laborer and other workers were admitted to the franchise. What adds to the irony of the situation is the fact that the very statesmen who are so zealous for the enfranchisement of the Uitlanders of a foreign country bitterly opposed the endowment of their own countrymen with the full rights of citizenship. But even now, after a century's agitation, manhood suffrage has yet to be gained, and our registration laws are designed to make it difficult for poor men to secure their votes. By the present system, many of those entitled to be on the register cannot get their names inserted, and, for a variety of reasons, not applicable to other sections of the community, it is calculated that there are no less than two millions of workmen who are excluded from the franchise. It is in this way that the working-class leaders look at the demand of the Uitlanders in the Transvaal. They do not blame them for seeking political power; nay, they are with them in their attempt to secure it. But they strongly object to assist them with the military forces of the nation to become citizens of another country, thereby renouncing their own nationality. In all the grievances set forth by the Uitlanders, workmen fail to find any which time would not have certainly remedied, and that at no distant period. They have waited for generations for reforms of the most equitable kind, and for some they still wait. Why, then, should South African millionaires not be called upon to exercise that patience preached so long as a cardinal virtue by the ruling classes in

England? This represents the attitude of organized working-class opinion to the alleged wrongs of the Uitlanders.

But it is not the details of diplomacy nor high questions of international law which appeal with much force to the democracy. These are shrouded in mysterious language, though the independence of the South African Republic stands out clear through all the fogs generated by the endless discussions in and out of Parliament. The appeal of Mr. Chamberlain to President Krüger to spare the lives of the principal actors in the Raid settles once for all in the minds of plain men the internal independence of the Transvaal. These things, however, do not go to the root of the mischief. The war is regarded as the outcome of a capitalist conspiracy. This is the conviction which shapes the action of the working-class leaders. Mr. John Burns voiced it in his able speech in the House of Commons, and it is shared by Radical and Socialist alike. They believe that it was not a desire for political power, but for Stock Exchange purposes, that the agitation against the Boer Government was started. For this view the Rhodesian capitalists are responsible. They have made it plain that to them the war has a commercial value. Mr. Hays Hammond, the engineer of the Consolidated Gold Fields Company of South Africa, estimates that the companies on the Rand will add two and a quarter millions annually to their dividend, his own company netting over a million of this extra profit. If this result is to be obtained from improved government, all well and good, and no reasonable man would object; but the source from which these increased dividends are to come is made clear. This same Mr. Hays Hammond, addressing the Consolidated shareholders, used these words:

"With good government there should be an abundance of labor, and with an abundance of labor there will be no difficulty in cutting down wages, because it is preposterous to pay a Kafir the present wages. He would be quite as well satisfied—in fact, he would work longer—if you gave him half the amount."

To the British workman this is not pleasant reading. He does not like to think that the veldt has been dyed red to make it easier for a small clique of capitalists, in which the German Jew is conspicuous, to grow rich at the expense of the wretched Kafirs. But how is the native to be exploited? This is not left in doubt. Mr. Albu, a leading Johannesburg capitalist, gave evidence before

the Transvaal Industrial Commission, and he was asked this question: "Is it in the control of the mining industry to regulate the wages of Kafirs?" His reply was conclusive: "To a great extent it is, provided that the Government assists us in bringing labor to this market." The Boer Government would not make itself a labor master to the capitalists, but would insist upon an eight-hour day in the mines, forbid Sunday labor, and would not allow the compound system to be set up. Franchise was as nothing to this unpardonable offense of the Boers. To these high-minded patriots Kimberley, with its overworked and low-paid black labor, and its state of semi-slavery, whereby the Kafir belongs to his employer during the whole of his contract period, is the paradise of their hopes, and the war may realize them. To the British democracy, such objects are altogether alien to the principles of liberty, but that is not all. The capitalists of South Africa have as little respect for white labor as black. They have not even a color pride—nothing but a passion for profit. This is how an Uitlander put it in the columns of the *Mining World*:

"White wages have not been reduced in the past, because the Uitlanders desired to work together for political salvation, and any attack upon the white laborer's pay would have caused a split in the ranks. However, when new conditions prevail, white wages must come down."

This lacks nothing in frankness, whatever one may think of its morality. In face of such avowed objects as these, is it strange that workmen in England are not at all anxious to see those "new conditions" brought about? They will be scarcely sufficient compensation for the awful loss of life and treasure of this war. If it has to be Krüger or Rhodes, British Trade Unionists prefer the old Dutchman, with all his faults, who, at any rate, is a better friend of white labor than the millionaires in a hurry to be rich, who reduce everything to the level of dividends. This is not the blind, class-war feeling indulged in by the State Socialist, nor hostility of the employed to the employer, but a deep-seated distrust and dislike of the international financier, often the enemy of the honest trader. To the representatives of labor the trail of these Shylocks of a gambling commercialism is apparent right through the devious tracks which led to the war.

In spite of the ease with which democracies can be misled by a false cry, the history of this century is a splendid tribute to the chivalry and unerring judgment of the masses of the British people, when once they realize what the issues of a great struggle be-

tween nations really mean. In the fight for Italian unity waged by Mazzini and Garibaldi, and in the heroic efforts of the Hungarian patriot, Kossuth, the heart of the democracy beat true to their cause. When the governing classes cast their influence on the side of the Southern States of America, it was workmen like Mr. W. R. Cremer and other prominent labor leaders who ranged behind Mr. John Bright the force of working-class opinion. It was there, too, on behalf of the suffering Armenians, and the spectacle of gallant little Greece throwing herself against the savage power of Turkey fired the imagination of the people. Those so-called Imperialists who can justify war to secure political reforms in a foreign State, would not risk anything to protect helpless men, women and children, for whom we had undertaken treaty obligations. For war to take permanent hold of the people, it must be for higher things than anything sought in the conflict with the two Dutch Republics. Indeed, if it rested with the democracy in England, so far as its mind can be ascertained, the resort to the sword would be a thing of the past. International arbitration as a practical proposal came from the working classes, and their leaders advocated it when the wise and eminent ones treated it as a pious opinion and its advocates as mere visionaries who were simple enough to believe in the Christianity that other people professed as a creed. It was Mr. Cremer who, in 1893, moved in the House of Commons a resolution in favor of a treaty of arbitration with the United States of America, which was carried without opposition, after Mr. Gladstone had given it his approval. That was followed by a petition to the United States Senate, which contained over 7,000 signatures of representative workmen, all of whom held some office in an organization. A similar one was presented to Lord Salisbury, to which were appended over 5,000 signatures. These documents prove in themselves how strong is the movement for international peace in the ranks of organized labor.

It is not merely that war is regarded as a barbarous method of settling disputes and a cruel waste of precious human life and treasure. It is all that, and men are beginning to question either its utility or morality. But the real fear is not so much what war costs in blood and extra taxation as the militarism it sets up. Already, the strain on our resources caused by the campaign in South Africa has begun to clothe with flesh those shadowy hints at con-

scription which have occasionally of late been thrown out. It is surely a dear price to pay for adding two republics to the Empire, even though it does increase the profits of gold mining from fifteen to forty-five per cent. Besides, the working classes have begun to doubt the "markets" policy of Mr. Chamberlain, and well they may. As the *Financial Reformer* showed some few months ago, this inflated Imperialism does not pay. From 1879 to 1894 the naval and military expenditure was £138,070,000; from 1893 to 1898 it rose to £187,058,000, the difference between these two periods of five years being an increase of £48,988,000 during the latter term. With the exports of British produce to all our colonies and possessions, it was just the reverse. Thus, from 1879 to 1884 the exports amounted to £403,799,000, while from 1893 to 1898 the total fell to £391,225,000, a decrease of £12,574,000. These figures do not make up a good balance sheet, and men now realize the hard fact that British trade in the main is done much nearer home, and that we had better pay more attention to our industrial equipment. The real battle of the future will be in the workshop, and it is technical education, not military service, which will give us our supremacy over Continental and American competitors. This is how the workers reason, and it leads them to fear the spread of militarism. So long as the Government encourages the idea that the Empire is in danger, conscription will excite little concern, but the moment it is put forward as a serious proposal the work people of the country will not hesitate in their resistance to it.

Militarism is an evil spirit not confined to the barrack-room; it creeps into the school and the workshop. Compulsory military service would change the old order of things, and would deaden that sense of self-sufficiency which has been the glory and strength of British workmen. They are willing to defend their island home, but that does not need conscription. But they do not bow down before the Imperial idea or indulge in visions of British supremacy regardless of the cost. To them England, not India, is the centre of empire, and, while by no means parochial in their outlook, they count it dear to add to the burden of the nation by imposing conscription on its sons for the sake of additional territory. Consolidation, not expansion, represents the democratic idea of Imperial policy. When Lord Salisbury declared that, in prosecuting this war in South Africa, England sought neither land

nor gold, he did much to disarm working-class criticism, but that wholesome doctrine has now been openly repudiated. The wiping out of the two Republics is now the Governmental dogma, and it is not one likely to find favor with the democracy. Though few workmen are pro-Boers, the courage the Boers have displayed and the tenacity with which they fight for their independence has won general admiration for a foe so worthy as these Dutchmen. It only needs the Government to push the conquest of the Republics to the extreme to make a goodly company of pro-Boers. Not long since, a well-known Trade Union leader declared to me that, so strongly did he feel our conduct to be unjust in this war, if he were unmarried he would attempt to join the armies of the Republics.

With a deep conviction that the gold mines are the source of all the trouble, and that the desire to make the Rhodesians supreme in the Transvaal was the most powerful motive behind the capitalist agitation, there is a rising volume of organized working class opinion in the United Kingdom against the war. The fact that President Krüger technically commenced hostilities, and that so far we have only been engaged in an attempt to repel the invaders, undoubtedly stills the voice of criticism. But this must not be mistaken for an endorsement of Mr. Chamberlain's diplomacy, nor as an indication that the democracy will look on indifferently while the all too few republics of the world are made less by two.

F. MADDISON.